

PASCAL AS POET AND MYSTIC

BY M. S. STANCYEVICH

LITERARY, scientific and other academic societies of France, recently celebrated the tercentenary of Pascal, the enigmatic poet, mystic and philosopher of the seventeenth century, an author who stands by himself, claiming no ancestors, leaving no successors. Although some of his works abound in contradictions, he still remains a living spirit, unlike any other, passionate, profound, individual and immortal. His books have moved, and continue to move the entire world.

I

Blaise Pascal was born three hundred years ago (1623) in Clermont Ferrand, Auvergne, the son of a well-known family, many members of which had held responsible positions in civil service. His father held the post of a provincial administrator, and his mother had died when he was three years old. The elder Pascal was a pious but stern person, and by no means disposed to entertain or allow any undue exaltation in religion. He directed the education of his son and wished him, before learning mathematics, to become proficient in languages. But the boy showed more remarkable precocity in physics and geometry than in languages and humanities. At the age of sixteen Blaise wrote an *Essay pour les coniques*, which filled Descartes with incredulity and admiration. This was soon followed by invention of a calculating machine, which later was improved and perfected by Charles Babbage.

For some years, the youth devoted himself so closely to scientific study as to overtax his physical strength. "From the age of eighteen," says his sister, Mme. Périer, "he hardly ever passed a day without pain." But in spite of pain he continued to work with his

accustomed ardor, until the publication of his *Nouvelles expériences touchant le vide* (1647), when he appears to have suffered, not merely from acute dyspepsia, but from a kind of paralysis. Afterwards he lived in Auvergne where his health was somewhat restored. At the end of 1650 his family came back to Paris, when Blaise for the first time began to mix with better society, and to enjoy for a certain time a worldly and Epicurian life.

It must have been during this period that he became acquainted with Parisian men of fashion and of intellectual tastes, the Duke of Rouannez, the Chevalier de Méré, a great sceptic, and Miton, an intellectual libertine. These men helped Pascal to rub off some of his provincial manners and modes of thought, and to polish his style. Meanwhile he continued his studies and proved the hypothesis of atmospheric and barometric pressure. He also made practical inventions such as the hydraulic press and some vehicles like the modern "bus." At one time or another of his life he worked out the theory of probability in games of chance, and foresaw the questions in higher mathematics of differential and integral calculus.

At the age of thirty, when Pascal was in the full plenitude of his intellectual development, he composed some interesting tracts, such as his *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*. This is a series of scattered reflections, brought together in book form. The passions are defined here as feelings and thoughts which belong exclusively to the spirit.

Purity of spirit causes also purity of passion: that is why a great and pure spirit loves with ardor and realizes distinctly what he loves.

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The passions which are most natural to man, and which comprehend most others, are love and ambition. They are not mutually connected; yet they exist together quite often; but they tend to weaken and even to destroy each other.

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Many of Pascal's critics believe that this fine treatise was inspired by the writer's passion for the beautiful and charming Charlotte de Rouannez, sister of his friend. She was a woman in high station, and in the prime of her love she was too exalted to become the wife of Blaise Pascal. It was she to whom he made the following allusions:

Man alone is not a complete being; to be happy he has need of another. Usually we seek this second self in our own rank, because the freedom and opportunity to manifest our feelings are found most easily among our equals. Sometimes, however, we love a woman of higher rank than our own, and the passion grows within us, though we dare not tell it to her who has caused it.

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When we thus love a woman set higher in the world than ourselves, ambition may at first attend upon love, but the latter soon gains the mastery. Love is a tyrant that will endure no rival; it wants to reign alone, and all other passions must yield to it and obey it.

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At Paris it was rumored that a *grand mariage* was in prospect. But the little love affair was never realized between Mademoiselle de Rouannez and Pascal. His intellectual interests and his fragile health diverted him entirely from the folly of passion. His "revealed Beatrice" for whom he ravished in adoration decided to enter the Convent of Port-Royal at Paris, where one of his sisters, who was a goodly poetess, Jaqueline, had already accepted a position there as a teacher and took the veil.

II

The life which Pascal led in the world left him sorrowing, and soon the things of the spirit claimed him altogether. This was at the end of 1654 or the beginning of 1655. The Cistercian Abbey of Port-Royal for a long time was known by the virulent controversy between the Jesuits and the Jansenists. The doctrine of Jansenism originated in the seventeenth century through Cornelius Jansen, professor of theology at the University of Louvain, and later bishop of Ypres in Flanders. The teaching of this theologian developed a puritanical spirit analogous to that of the French Calvinists. He urged that in a spiritual religion experience, not reason, must be our guide.

This doctrine so pleased Pascal, that it came as a new order into his life and continued to the end. He was not now satisfied to take a merely academic interest in the disputes, but turned the attack against the enemy in his entrenched camp of morals. It was at this point that he dashed into the combat with his famous *Petites Lettres* called *Les Provinciales*, which made him the champion of Jansenism. In these letters Pascal found his true style, and took rank at once among the great writers of France. He had probably been himself unaware of his own powers, since his previous scientific papers *De l'équilibre des liqueurs* and *De la pesanteur de la masse de l'air* together with his *Traité du triangle arithmétique*, show no trace of the admirable language of these letters. The style of the *Lettres Provinciales* is noble, simple and impassioned; it is vivid, full of individuality and free from all rhetorical device. If the Buffon's apophthegm, *Le style c'est l'homme même*, could not be used for every writer, it would certainly be safely applied in this case. Joseph de Maistre anathemized *Les Provinciales* as "a very pretty libel," and Chateaubriand characterized them as "an immortal lie." But in spite of this superficial condemnation they have great literary value, and they have secured for Pascal a place among the first masters of French prose.

We cannot speak here at length on the *Provincial Letters*. Outside France they are not much read today. Like all polemical and sarcastical writings, they would require a separate study, and should be treated historically before one could do them justice. For this reason they do not lend themselves to quotation. It is the *Pensées* that really bring Pascal into the region of the sublime; and it is of the *Pensées* that we would now speak.

After completing *Les Provinciales*, Pascal designed a work in defense of Christianity. He did not live to write it. In the last years of his painful life he wrote down his meditations, mostly on the subject of spirit and religion. After his death (August 19, 1662), these scattered memoranda, written sometimes criss-cross, and without any system, were found among his papers. They were published by the Jansenists of Port-Royal, with many excisions. Léon Brunschvicq in his new editions of 1904 has fortunately restored the full text from the original. In reading the *Pensées* now we may feel that we have them as they came from the author's pen.

The *Pensées* are written in prose form. But every line of this prose is vibrating with inspiration and poetry of the Christian religion. Their author never thought of gaining glory as a poet. Such a title would not flatter him. More than any other man he believed only one thing necessary: to assure eternity. Yet, many fragments of the *Pensées* can vie with the poems of any great genius.

The poets of today are almost unanimous in affirming that an idea, directly expressed as an idea in order to convince, cannot assume real poetic value. They would charge as folly the pretension to expand in poetry an idea developing it logically and dialectically. But it would be naïve to think that the terms which exclude each other from the modern standpoint, would refuse to associate in the eternal necessity of things. Our era is like other epochs: it is consulting its tastes, its tendencies and its possibilities. Experience has shown that the logicians, dialecticians and orators have not despised poetry. Who does not inhale the delicate perfume from the agile and captious arguments of Plato? Who would not feel quivering in such a picture of passion in which the ardent words of Bossuet give you a sensation as if the suffering of Jesus would traverse your body?

The subject of the *Thoughts* is in reality the unspeakable misery of humanity given up to its own forces without the luminous road of Providence. There are fragments in this work which describe the weak efforts of man to get knowledge, and these efforts seem to Pascal one of the episodes most poignant of our misery, and which is not taken into consideration by man in general. The divine poetry of Pascal rests on the gift of substitution. It is a kind of offering of all his being to the tearing pity of man. His lyrism is more than the lyrism of a man, it is the lyrism of the man. This lyrism is identification of man with humanity, so pitiable in its striking grandeur.

III

Lyrism, however, should not be identified with poesy. It is only one aspect of poetry. Romanticists and many other writers generally forget to detect this essential difference. The notion of poetry

is infinitely more vast than the notion of lyrism. Take for instance the following passages:

The whole visible world is but an almost imperceptible speck in the vast expanse of the universe. No idea of ours can approximate to its immense extant. However, we may amplify our conceptions, they will still be mere atoms in comparison with the reality of things. This is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, but its circumference nowhere.

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Man is but a reed, weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. It is not necessary that the entire universe arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But were the universe to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which has slain him, because he knows that he dies, and the universe knows nothing of the advantage it has over him.

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There are critics who emphatically declare that formal versification is the fundamental requisite for good poetry. They would probably hesitate to accept the above lines as poetry. But Pascal is an example which evidently shows that the dominant quality of poetry is inspiration. His emotion, invention, and imagination "come from the heart and go to the heart," as Wordsworth would say. He is beyond doubt a poet *par excellence*. His ideas tend invincibly to assume poetic style and form, and to be expressed lyrically or not presented at all. In fact, they are something more than mere ideas. They are real life expressed too lively. The ardent dialectics of Pascal reverberate the spirit and heart, flesh and blood. His terms, as synthetic as language can furnish, are blended with the rhythm of life. One idea is spouting out another, in a nervous argumentation which seems like an élan; one pulsation of life is mounting on another. And this vivid dialectic, touching the summit of ecstasy, brightens up naturally into mental images or visions.

With Pascal, the vision is generally born from warmth of argumentation. For him it is a carnal argument. However, he has no predilection for noble or trivial vision. And just for that reason because he does not make selection of visions, but receives them as they appear in correspondence with his idea, he gives us the impression of a most modern author. Nothing is antiquated in his writings. With this gift of transforming ideas into rhythm and

sensation, that is into organic life, every problem considered by him in the order of thought is welded with drama and exalted into the pathetic. Here is not the question of cold considerations and gray distinctions which we want to attract or to evade. The problem of the limitation of knowledge transmutes into human suffering. Men who insatiably desire, move and go in search of the Absolute to obtain life, come to the scene. Before us is unfolded a convulsive fresco. With arms raised toward the planet-sprinkled sky, frantic emotions culminating in spontaneous outpourings, spasmodic pangs, overcome afflictions, incoherent dreams, despairing cries—all this forms Pascal's problem of knowledge and mystic experience. Some theme for poetry, indeed!

Besides poetry resulting from the pathetic and dramatic accent of thought, there are other aspects of Pascalian poetry, namely, the effective employment of imagination and immense perspectives open to vague reverie. Pascal possessed a strange gift of being able to pass spontaneously from the most precise and minute detail to the ensemble of all things. Under any object of thought presented by this mystic poet, one feels almost always the approaching of cosmic abysses which will carry him and swallow him up at the same time. With this gift of binding instantaneously the whole and the particulars, Pascal was able to create the highest intellectual poetry, consisting of compressed lines under which one feels the multitude of things and ideas not verbally expressed, but implicitly comprehended.

Cromwell was on the point of overturning all Christianity; the royal family would have been ruined, and his own permanently established, if a small gravel had not lodged in his ureter.

The nose of Cleopatra—had it been a little bit shorter, all the world would have been changed.

I put it down as a fact that if all men knew what each said of the other, there would not be four friends in the whole world.

He who loves a female for her beauty, does he really love her? No; for let the small-pox destroy her beauty—his passion would subside.

Men are governed far more by their fancies, than by reason.

You read these maxims and an abyss of meditations opens to infinite possibilities. Pascal was able to condense into one line or one phrase what would be necessary for others to write in volumes. His words in such cases are not *vains mots* but explosives. The most intense passages of his brilliant poetry are striking and dazzling beauties.

It has frequently been made a reproach to Pascal that he deals only with the darker and more terrible experiences of life. He has been represented as a sombre pessimist probing with uncanny skill the festering wounds of maimed and mangled Christian souls. Sometimes it has been more than hinted that the dyspeptic attacks and headaches from which he constantly suffered, had undermined his sanity, and that he had become incapable of seeing anything in the world but eternal despair, hate and tears.

All this criticism, however, fails to recognize the fact that Pascal is not a poet merely, judging him by his sublime style and diction, but one of the world's great masters of human tragedy. Like the supreme creations of Greek dramatic genius, Pascal's works portray the terrifying human soul as it fathoms the depths of suffering and sin. It is only under such extreme circumstances that the utmost possibilities of our nature can be tested, and it is just at this point that all spiritual resources of faith or hope stand revealed. Here lies the power of tragedy to convey some of the profoundest lessons of religion—a power which Pascal recognized and used as unmistakably as Aeschylus or Sophocles.

To understand well the great French moralist and mystic undoubtedly one must study and comprehend the times in which he lived. The seventeenth century was the age of coarseness, artificiality and shallowness. It produced such men as the rather brutish and absolutist, Louis XIV, who used to say, *L'état, c'est moi*. But we ought to remember that it was also the century of Pascal, one of the most spiritual, lofty and sober of all French moralists. He contributed more than any other French author to form the geniuses of Racine, Molière, Voltaire and Rousseau. His *Provinciales* and *Pensées* are considered perfect models in the literary art of writing. Pascal is not only the most illustrious man of the Port-Royal, he is the honor of the seventeenth century, the honor of France and of all humanity.